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**Decoding the Mystery of Beginning  
Band French Horn**

**CLINICIANS:**

**Jennifer Wren, Jenna Yee, Lara Whitehouse**



**HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER - SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

# Decoding The Mystery of Beginning Band French Horn

Jennifer Wren - [jwren2@kleinisd.net](mailto:jwren2@kleinisd.net)

Jenna Yee - [jenna.yee@leanderisd.org](mailto:jenna.yee@leanderisd.org)

Lara Whitehouse - [lwhitehouse@irvingisd.net](mailto:lwhitehouse@irvingisd.net)

**Equipment** - you may be constrained by the inventory on your campus as to what instrument you use for your beginners. Jennifer and Lara use a Holton 179 with Farkas MDC mouthpiece. Jenna uses Holton 181 and Farkas MDC mouthpiece. Other important equipment for students to have would be a metronome/tuner with a pick up clip and a stand for home practice to encourage proper posture

**Mouthpiece Placement/Horn Angle** - A student's mouthpiece placement and the angle of their lead pipe has an enormous effect on their ability to create a characteristic tone and achieve desirable range. Most French Horn players will set their mouthpiece to  $\frac{2}{3}$  top lip in the mouthpiece and  $\frac{1}{3}$  bottom lip in the mouthpiece. The horn should then be angled down so that there is little to no pressure on the top lip. This typically looks like a 45 degree angle coming from the player. There are some great reference photos in *The Art of French Horn Playing* by Phillip Farkas. Students can be adjusted based on their size to prioritize mouthpiece placement and angle to ensure that they will have the range they need and develop a characteristic tone.

**Harmonic Series** - Having a basic understanding of the harmonic series on the F side of the horn and introducing the basics to students can help them learn how to transfer that knowledge to the Bb side of the horn, especially when they will be doing lip slurs in full band on the Bb side to match the band and frequently needing to skip partials to align with the other brass instruments. This improves efficiency, range, and accuracy.

**Oral Cavity** - The way that you describe the oral cavity to your horn students is one of the biggest ways to separate the sounds of your horns from your trumpets. On your conical brass instruments, we want to make sure that we still focus on the direct air stream moving forward like we do for the cylindrical brass but that we talk more about the openness of the back of the throat. To achieve this, talk to your horn students about making it feel like they are yawning so that they really open the back of the throat and can continue the resonance of the instrument into the oral cavity vs just having a laser of air going through the instrument in a straight line. Almost think of it like a light saber with trumpet and trombone but a light saber with a bulb at the back for horn, euphonium and tuba. That resonance will really help get the darker, characteristic tone you are looking for. The darker tone quality will also appear when you focus on stretching low lip slurs and flexibility on both the F and Bb sides of the horn because it forces them to feel like they are pulling the pitch down.

**Tuning** - The question everyone wants to know!! First of all, know that different makes and models of horns have their slides in different places. Make sure that you know where on your horns you can find the F side main tuning slide (most have two that can split the difference for how far they are pulled) and the Bb main tuning slide (spoiler alert: Conn 8Ds do not have a Bb main tuning slide- it is a fake slide for dumping water). I tune the F side to a G then 2nd valve to F#, 1st valve to F and then 3rd valve to an E on 3rd valve alone. For the Bb side, I tune to a C for most students even though this can be a naturally sharp note. Since it is their concert F, we spent A LOT of time training them to play this in tune with their slide in a reasonable place. Then on trigger, I tune T2 to B, T1 to Bb and T3 to an A with only 3rd valve. Hand position has a lot to do with intonation so consistently sharp horns could have an issue with a tongue that is too high, an oral cavity that is not open and resonant enough or a hand that is incorrectly placed or not in far enough. **You**

**cannot address tuning with your horn students until their hand position is set and consistently correct.**

**Teaching Horn with Trumpet** - In teaching trumpet and horn together, it is important that you are starting your horn players in a range that is comfortable for them and that they will typically play in. For this reason, it is recommended that you have your trumpet and horn players read the same note names, which means they sound in perfect 4ths. For class setup, it is recommended that you place horn players behind the trumpet players when they are not playing in unison so that the horn players do not get confused by the trumpet pitch. Give the horn players ample chances to perform by themselves and sing their own pitches. When you have music where the trumpet and horn players play in unison, you may place the trumpet players behind the horns so that the horns can reference the trumpets for their pitch. Whenever possible, ensure that your stronger horn players are always sitting on the left with their bell aimed toward the weaker students.

## Posture / On the leg vs. Off the leg

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
I used to start all students on the leg and would help my students place their right leg out to the side and down at an angle to help make sure that they could get the correct lead pipe angle. Within the last few years, I have transitioned to starting some students on the leg and some off the leg. All students start by having their right hand holding outside the bell at about 4:00. I find that having the option to start some students off the leg has helped my extra short and extra tall kiddos.	I start students on the leg to provide stability to the embouchure and an additional contact point. We talk a lot about right leg placement and where they sit on the chair so that the horn angle is correct. This means students may look slightly different in their chair from child to child but what will not be different is the angle of their horn and mouthpiece placement.	I have most students (depending on size) start on the leg so that our primary focus can be on instrument angle and mouthpiece placement. I ensure that each student knows where to sit on the chair and how to position their right leg in order to make sure that their instrument angle and mouthpiece placement are correct. I have them all hold the outside of the bell with their right hand throughout the first semester.

## Hand in the Bell

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>I normally start this the week after the MLK holiday. This gives us a chance to review after the winter break without throwing any huge wrenches into their knowledge. Students are typically excited to get to this point, but then some will complain that it hurts or it's uncomfortable so before we start, I always let them know that if it hurts, you're probably doing something wrong.</p> <p>Put all of your fingers together, including your thumb. There should be a slight "speed bump" at the big knuckle. When you place your hand in the bell, your fingers should touch the bell up until your big knuckles. The back of the palm will not touch the bell. Your big knuckle will rest at the big flare of the bell. If your bell is a big clock, your thumb will go in at around 12 or 1 o'clock. Keep the wrist straight.</p> <p>Make sure you have open space behind your horn players so that you can constantly walk behind them and monitor their hand position, even into 7th and 8th grade.</p>	<p>I typically move students from holding the bell to in the bell in late October or early November. Having their hand in the bell correctly will help train their ear to a darker tone quality and pull the pitch down without over manipulating embouchure or slides. We are very clear that this is a rite of passage and I usually have an 8th grade office aide that helps make a big deal of it too.</p> <p>I place every student individually based on the way they sit for horn angle and the size of their hand. They will initially have a slight loss of what they know to be stability when it is new. We hold out our hand like someone would give them food with all fingers touching and then we turn it to the side so they can see that their thumb and side of their hand create a "table". The table goes at 1 o'clock, just to the right of the brace and I place a piece of painters tape in the bell in the spot for that student. We will start with the once piece of tape while I watch and tweak daily and once we have them in a good spot, I put a 2nd piece of tape for the other side of their hand. This does not show them how far in to go because they cannot feel that with their nails but helps with side placement. This placement allows for future stop horn since the hand should not move around the clock face but simply seal from the same location down the road.</p> <p>When you are placing hands, it is important to get behind students regularly to see what they are doing and create student ownership over how important it is. Friends don't let friends have lazy hands!</p>	<p>I start this in late January after we have had some time to review and "recover" from winter break. They are usually really excited about this and have been asking about it since August!</p> <p>I have them put all of their fingers including their thumb together with a slight bend at the big knuckles and then talk about creating a "table" using their thumb and index finger. I move around to each student and adjust as needed.</p> <p>I have them place their hand in the bell around 1 o'clock and then have them move their hand further into the bell until they feel their big knuckles make contact with the bell. For future reference and consistency, I place a piece of painters tape inside the bell where their knuckles make contact.</p> <p>I walk behind them and constantly monitor their hand position and ensure that their fingers are together, wrist is straight, and hand is in the correct place.</p>

## “Early Weeks” - how we start, starting note, first few notes

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>We practice holding our instrument quite a bit before we have even started playing. This way, I am emphasizing the correct mouthpiece placement and lead pipe angle before they start playing on the instrument. I typically start them on the mouthpiece and quickly transition to the horn. I find that students understand “good sound” on an instrument as opposed to on the mouthpiece early on. We spend a few days with everyone playing their own note (I try to lead them to C,E, or G). Pretty early on, I work to get them to play the same note over and over so they start to understand consistency and memorizing what a note feels like. Once everyone’s note has a characteristic sound, I transition everyone to E. At this point, I have already used some terminology for how to play higher and lower in order to help students who are not consistently hitting the same note (so students who were on G or C have the tools to move to E). After a few days of playing E, we move to F then G. After we can play those three notes consistently, I start on E again then go down to D and C. Typically we can play the first 5 notes consistently within the first 4 weeks of playing.</p>	<p>We start with A LOT of rhythm and note reading then get to mouthpiece basics. I do mouthpiece vibrations first and pitch matching but I always just have them repeat after me and move fast so there isn’t time to be nervous and they have lots of opportunities to try. We do not spend a lot of time only on mouthpiece because their ears are young. The harmonic series and feeling it “lock in” also helps to train their ear.</p> <p>I start students on G and we spend a TON of time repeating ‘I play, You play’ on horn, mouthpiece and BERP. We talk about air pointing down and mimicking what I do. When we are mostly on G .I add E and we play G and E a ton then we add C. We sit in the triad for A LONG TIME. We do different drills, read written basic patterns and do just a ton of things on G, E, and C only (even when other classes can play more notes). They play 3 constantly in different ways and we call it the “triad of truth”. When that is super solid, we will do it tongued in 1st, 2nd and 3rd positions and then I introduce lip slurs and 4th position. We are slurring the triad in multiple positions before I plug in G down to C and then have a mini scale...”hey look, you already know these notes!” How fast I move and how far I push varies from class to class and I make sure I am moving at a speed that challenges them but also is for THEM.</p> <p>I truly believe that when they are SOLID in the basic first 5 notes, it helps students train their ear to a home base, establishes a “high middle and low”, strengthens their lip slurs, flexibility and confidence and has students more able to come in on the right note and cracking less. LOTS of mouthpiece matching AND horn matching so that they learn that what they vibrate is what comes out of the horn.</p> <p>All of this work is done with supplemental materials (seriously basic) and then when we get in the book around October, we fly.</p>	<p>I have them practice holding their instrument up, move from ready to playing position, and place their mouthpiece numerous times before we start to play the instrument. I adjust and refine instrument angle and mouthpiece placement as needed and have them practice this process for muscle memory.</p> <p>The first sound we make is on the mouthpiece. We do air to vibration and then move quickly to the instrument from there and constantly talk about making it FEEL the same. If I notice any tension or forcing once we add the instrument, I go back to just mouthpiece, and then go through the process again.</p> <p>Initially, everyone will be playing their own note. As long as they are doing everything correctly, I only try to get them to C, E or G without focusing on it being just one of the notes. After a day or two, I try to get everyone on E and work on having them consistently start on the same note. If they are consistently lower or higher than E, I use a straw analogy (Sonic straw, McDonalds straw, coffee stirrer, etc.) to work on changing their aperture size to get to the correct pitch. I expand the terminology I use for playing higher and lower from there, but that usually seems to click for many of them. Using this terminology, I get them to consistently move between G, E, and C and quickly as possible. We do this on mouthpiece only as well as LOTS of call and response to solidify what it feels like and sounds like to play these 3 notes before moving forward. After they have a really strong grasp of this and can start on any of these three pitches, I add in F and D and we are able to play the first 5 notes. This typically happens within the first 4-5 weeks. Once we get to this point and have introduced articulation, we move on to the book.</p>

## Articulation

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>I typically start articulation on the 3rd or 4th week of playing. We start off by saying lots of words that start with T (taco, Tuesday, today, teletubby, etc) and then I get students to hold an airstream after starting it with a T (Toooooo). I then have them blow a long airstream and "touch the air with their tongue." (Tooooooooooooooooooooo). I let them experiment with this on their own for a while then hear them individually. Typically the biggest issue is students stopping their air before they start the next note. I will tell those students to hold a long note on their instrument/mouthpiece and only tongue when they feel me touch their shoulder from behind. This typically keeps them from thinking too much about what their tongue is doing. Articulation is one concept that I really try not to over-explain at the beginning!</p>	<p>We start talking about articulation before they even play by counting, ta-ing and air blowing. We start them articulating right away so that it is not a big deal and not over enunciated and then when they start lip slurring, they can move back and forth easily. We start articulating the start of a whole note and then alternating from ta-ing to airblowing to instrument. This lets them feel it without the instrument then add the instrument (known to unknown). This is another skill that we keep simple so that they don't overanalyze.</p> <p>For horns, I have them tongue at the bottom of their top teeth. Their tongue will be lower than a trumpet and helps keeps their oral cavity open and relaxed.</p>	<p>We start articulation as soon as they can steadily sustain C, E and G. This is typically around week 4-5. We talk A LOT about long/whole note air as we add in articulation. We start by articulating the start of a whole note using a "ta" syllable. I have them do this just by moving air through their aperture to the center of their palm first so that they can FEEL a consistent, steady air stream as soon as their tongue moves back to the bottom of their mouth. Once we have done this and I have been able to monitor that they are doing it correctly, we move to the instrument and talk a ton about making sure it FEELS the same. Once they are beginning to grasp this, I talk about the tongue "slightly interrupting" the air stream to articulate touching notes. We also do this by moving air to the center of the palm first and feeling that the air never stops, but is only interrupting the air to define the start of each note. I let them experiment with this on their own for a couple of minutes and then listen to each student individually and refine.</p>

## Flexibility / Lip Slurs

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>I typically introduce flexibility exercises around the beginning of October. We start by doing "sirens" down on our mouthpiece. We have already learned how to play lower on our instrument, but in sirens we are listening for the air not to stop and for our sound to stay the same volume on each note. The next day, we will do a "siren" down on our instrument starting on second line G. The next day we'll do that again, and then I'll tell them to try this on 2nd valve. At that point, I will go through the chromatic finger pattern until the majority of the class has a problem getting down to the bottom note (typically around 1,2 on the second day). I have a lip slur sheet that has slurs from G to E then E to C then we combine it into a 3 note descending slur (probably by the beginning of November). At this point, I have likely also introduced two note slurs going up, but won't put them into a 3 note slur until December.</p> <p>In the second semester, we do our 3 note slur going up and down on the descending chromatic finger pattern and start working on the ascending chromatic finger pattern (0, T23, T12, T1, T2, T0). Lip slurs are a HUGE way that I incorporate range into our daily routine.</p> <p>Unlike my other brass classes, I don't tell my French Horns the name of every note that they are playing on each fingering of the lip slurs. Since many of these are alternate fingerings, I have found that introducing these</p>	<p>We start articulating and then start lip slurs when we get the triad solid. I start slurring down first then up. We start talking about the harmonic series and partial numbers right away so that when we transition to Bb horn later, they know how they are related. So we start with 6-5-4 then 4-5-6. This is also how I initially build range. I will start them in 4th position and do 4-5-6 then 4-5-6-7 then 4-5-6-7-8 gradually building to that pattern open. They are playing C on the F side of the horn, 8th partial, with more resistance and have a full octave built with strength. Then they learn how to play on the Bb side of the horn and it feels easy. After all of that, we do the same thing on the Bb side of the horn that eventually builds them to high F.</p> <p>With the beginners, we spend the majority of our time in partials 3-8 on the F and Bb sides of the horn, varying speeds and combinations and having students lead as we progress. This REALLY builds strength and accuracy while building range.</p>	<p>We start lip slurs once we are solid on C, E and G. We start by slurring down and then up. We do sirens on the mouthpiece and reiterate that the air never stops and then move back to the instrument. Once they grasp this, I have them add their 2nd valve, then 1st, etc. to work down chromatically. We do lip slurs every day once we start. I use lip slurs to start building range and will add the 7th partial beginning on 2,3 later in the first semester and work our way up from there. I isolate them a lot throughout this process to ensure that they are all approaching them correctly.</p> <p>In the second semester, we play 3 and 4 note slurs daily on both the F and Bb sides (up to 7th partial) and add in 5 note slurs later in the semester for students who are ready for that.</p>

too early can confuse students.		
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## Ear Training

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>This is something we talk about every day. I teach the vocabulary <i>skip</i> and <i>step</i> so students are aware if their notes will sound (and <b>feel</b>) close together or far apart. When we have skips in our music, we talk about how big the skip is and what notes we might accidentally hit if we don't play high or low enough. As students get older, I help them become more aware of the "weird" notes that will come out on each fingering (for example 4th line B-flat on open).</p> <p>In the second semester, I will spend the long tone portion of our warm-up on an accuracy exercise. I will call out random notes and they will have to think about skip vs. step, big vs. small, up vs. down, etc. When we start this, I will play the note on the Harmony Director for them, but eventually I stop so they have to find it on their own. I also start out by giving them a few chances to find the note before we go on to the next one and eventually only give them one chance.</p> <p>Throughout the year, we do accuracy quizzes where I tell them what grade they would get if I ONLY counted correct pitches. (I don't typically take actual grades on this because it can be pretty eye opening for some kids).</p> <p>We spend time singing each line before and after we play it so they know what it sounds like when they go practice it at home. We also practice on our mouthpiece so they can <b>feel</b> what it means to buzz in the center of each note.</p>	<p>This is something we are doing every single day but most of it is subconscious :) We note name, ta, position on pitch and call it those things so that they don't even realize how much their ear is being drilled.</p> <p>Ear training also includes building accuracy on mouthpiece/BERP and being able to find starting notes on their own as they progress. We play games where they have to guess what note I played, down the row without cracking and more just to train their ear like mad while making it fun.</p>	<p>We work on this every single day. We hum, sing and play early on. Once we are in the book, we note name each line on pitch, then note names on pitch with fingers, then play. We do this for each new line we learn or piece we play. I use the Harmony Director every day so that they are constantly hearing pitches accurately and singing them accurately. I also have them match pitch on their mouthpiece and then move back to the horn to continually work on accuracy, matching, developing their ear and memorizing what it feels like to play to the center of the note.</p>

## Goals by Christmas

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>We do a Winter Concert each year, which could possibly dictate some of your goals for the first semester. I like to have my students be able to play chromatically from low A below the staff to at least A in the staff, but typically more like B-flat or C.</p> <p>In mid to late November, I start tetrachords (4 note scales) with the notes that are in our range and we will eventually add these together to learn our scales in the second semester.</p> <p>For lip slurs, we are working on our 3-4 note slurs going up and down and are trying to expand the range with this.</p> <p>We are able to count and play lines with whole notes, dotted half notes, quarter notes, and simple eighth notes.</p>	<p>We play the same two songs for the beginner concert every year and they are crazy easy so that we can move classes at an appropriate speed for the kids in the class that year and still have a killer concert that makes the parents cry. In an ideal world, I have them at a low G or F up to a C or D by Christmas, slurring 4th-8th partials on the F side of the horn and starting the Bb side of the horn. They are articulating whole notes-eighth notes and are usually into the 40s or 50s in Essential Elements.</p>	<p>Based on 25-30 minutes class periods: We have a Winter Concert each year and play the same few pieces every year. These pieces fit well within our goals for the first semester so that they are able to focus on how they fit in with the rest of the band. Ideally they are able to play chromatically from low G or F up to Bb. At this point we are also beginning to introduce and learn scales within this range. They are slurring 4th-7th partials, articulating whole notes-eighth notes and are around line 35-40 in the Essential Elements book.</p>

## Spring Semester/ End of Year Goals

Jennifer	Jenna	Lara
<p>Lip Slurs - From Beginning Band through Advanced Bands, I use lip slurs for two purposes - range and flexibility. By the end of the year, the goal is to be doing a 5 note slur up and also slurring down to low C (some years are more successful than others!). When you do these expanded range lip slurs, you can cover three octaves of the horn! For flexibility, I will not go through as many harmonics but will push the tempo instead (Ex: GECE, CECE repeat 3x).</p> <p>We have a solo contest for our Beginning Band students in March after Spring Break where we teach a class solo for students to experience earning a reward for their own individual performance. Typically we choose a solo from the Festival Solo Book (trumpet book)</p> <p>Scales - I like to make it through at least 8 scales in the beginning band year. Ideally, I will teach at least one 2 octave scale so they can understand how that works (typically D or C).</p> <p>Chromatic Scale - depending on the year, we can play our chromatic scale from low C or F up to 4th line D. Many students have ranges higher and lower than this, but this is our class goal.</p> <p>We have an end of year concert and band contest for our Beginners and an audition piece that will include dotted quarter notes, and a very basic 16th note rhythm.</p>	<p>Typically they have been introduced to low C through high Bb (not ALL are getting that), first 8 scales, sometimes 1-2 2 octave scales, chromatic, wholes-sixteenths, 6/8 time.</p> <p>I usually do their solo as Vega (trumpet solo) so that they are moving their tongue and fingers.</p> <p>We typically get well into book 2 and they can play grade 2 full band pieces.</p>	<p>Based on 25-30 minute class periods:</p> <p>Lip Slurs: 3rd-7th partial</p> <p>Scales: At least 7 major scales as well as chromatic from low F to C. More advanced students are playing from low F to F.</p> <p>Solo Contest: We have a class solo for each class, but I really encourage my horn classes to play a solo that pushes them a bit and is appropriate for their level of development. Typically about half of the class will perform the class solo and the rest will perform one that is a bit more challenging.</p> <p>Rhythmically: Students should be able to perform lines/excerpts that include dotted quarter notes and basic 16th note rhythms.</p> <p>At the end of the year students are able to perform grade 1 full band pieces and are near the end of the method book.</p>